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Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion With Human Rights Activists in Dakar

April 2, 1998

The President. First let me say how delighted that I am to have such a distinguished group to discuss human rights and democracy in Africa. I thank our panelists for being here, and also let me thank all of those who are here in the audience who have worked on this cause across the continent in your various countries and, in at least one instance, in your particular village.

I think it is clear that there has been some significant progress in Africa in the decade of the nineties. The number of governments that were elected by their people have gone from 5 to 24. But we have to be clear: There is still a huge human rights challenge, a huge democracy challenge in Africa.

We believe that human rights are universal. That's what the international Declaration of Human Rights says. That's why the United States has worked hard to support democracy and human rights in Africa. Since 1989, we have worked in 46 different African nations. We have invested more than $400 million of our taxpayers' money to support elections, to reform judiciaries, to strengthen the participation of citizens in decisionmaking that affects our own lives. That support will continue.

I have seen many heartening signs on this trip in South Africa, in the determination of the people I spoke with in Rwanda and in many other places, to continue to press the cause of human rights. Mostly though, I am here to listen and learn from you.

And I want to say a special word of appreciation to the First Lady for the work she's done on these issues, especially beginning at the Beijing women's conference and the work that began here in Senegal last year on the issue of female genital mutilation, which I know she had a meeting about this morning.

Would you like to say anything before we begin?

[*Hillary Clinton welcomed the guests and recognized a group of villagers from Malicounda Bambara, praising their efforts to eliminate the ancient custom of female circumcision in Senegal.*]

The President. Now, let's begin. There are many issues here that I hope we can have discussed today, and if they may be covered in the initial comments by our speakers, we want to talk about democracy and human rights. We want to talk about the threat of ethnic conflict to forming a unified democratic environment. We want to talk about how—the challenge of investigating past abuses and working for justice while promoting national unity and reconciliation, issues of freedom of the press, women's rights. There are a number of things that I hope we can deal with today.

But again, I want all of you to feel free to say mostly what it is you want to say about where you are, what you're doing, and what you believe the United States can do to support your endeavors.

Who would like to go first? Someone volunteer? Archbishop?

[*Archbishop Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki, of Nairobi, Kenya, chairman, Kenya National Justice and Peace Commission, explained that although Kenya made advancements in democracy and human rights, corruption among law enforcement and political leaders led to increased violent crime. He stated that the people of Kenya needed U.S. support to continue their struggle for reform.*]

The President. Thank you very much.

[*Samuel Kofi Woods, executive director, Justice and Peace Commission, National Catholic Secretariat, described the human rights situation in Liberia and urged the United States to support the establishment of institutions in Liberia to safeguard the rights of its citizens and advance the cause of democracy. Reginald Matchaba Hove, chairman, Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, discussed the process of reconciliation following human rights abuses, and stated that confession, acknowledgement of guilt, and forgiveness were necessary cathartic steps for both the abused and the abusers. He encouraged the U.S. Government to support local initiatives to ensure reconciliation and commended the President's visit, particularly to Goree Island, as an important gesture.*]

The President. Thank you, Doctor, very much. I don't want to interrupt the flow of the statements, but I would like to pose a question that we can return to perhaps after you all make your statements, if it's not convenient to address it as you go along. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to which you referred obviously has made a great impression on people all across the world, and it has a great appeal. Yet, thinking about practically how you would do it in another country raises the question of whether it is possible if the leader of the country is not someone like Mr. Mandela. That is, he suffered so grievously himself, he is in a position to come forward and say, "This is the procedure I advocate, and if it's okay with me, who are you to say it's not enough?"

So, on the one hand, since he was the oppressed, he can make sure—to go back to something that Sam and the Archbishop said—he can make sure that the power of government is put at the service of the people who have been abused, something that others may not be able to do. And on the other hand, he can say to those who lost their loved ones or who were horribly scarred or maimed, "I can forgive. You should, too." So there is a unique position there.

If you sought to do something like that in other countries and we wanted to support it, as a practical matter, could it be done in a way that would either make the people who had been abused feel that they were at peace or, on the other hand, reach the consciousness of those who may be duly elected now but still may have done things for which they should atone? That, I think, is the problem we have all tried to come to terms with.

Anyway, who would like to go next? Anyone?

[*Baudoin Hamuli of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), executive secretary, National Council of Development, Non-Governmental Organizations, described the positive changes that had occurred since President Laurent Kabila replaced former President Mobutu Sese Seko, but expressed concern that, without a constitutionally based government, the opportunity still existed for abuse of power. He urged the United States to pressure President Kabila for more democratization and to support peace efforts in the Great Lakes area, poverty alleviation programs, and economic reconstruction.*]

The President. Let me just say very briefly about this, this is very helpful. Any hope we have, I think, of having a regional system for developing the Great Lakes region, and indeed to some extent a larger in Africa, rests on the successful emergence of the Congo as a functioning democratic society. And we have here leaders—Mr. Royce, the Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee in the Congress, and our Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, and Reverend Jackson, my Special Envoy for Africa—we're all trying to figure out how we can best work with and influence Mr. Kabila, because, as you point out, I think one of their biggest handicaps is so many of them in the government were out of the Congo for so long. And then when they came in and started the struggle to replace Mobutu, I think it happened even more easily and more quickly than they thought it would.

But now they're confronted with what has typically been a dilemma, sometimes more imagined than real, for people in positions of governance. They say, "Well, you know, these countries, they fluctuate between anarchy and abusive dictatorship, so I don't want anarchy, so maybe I'll be a less abusive dictator." You've heard this story throughout your whole lives.

So what we have to do is somehow find a way for other countries from the outside and people like you from the inside to show these people who have come into the government, oftentimes from many years away from the Congo, if you will, a middle way, a way to—and the only way they can succeed—of empowering people at the grassroots level and working out a less centralized approach.

And we will work very hard on it, because I believe that if the transition of the Congo away from Mobutu to a genuine democratic, functioning government could succeed, as vast and as wealthy as the country is—and with the horrible history of the last few years—it would be a stunning example to the rest of the continent, indeed, to places in other continents of the world. So it's a very important issue. And I thank you very much for it.

[*Director of Studies Amsatou Sow Sidibe of the Peace and Human Rights Institute at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar described Senegal's strong democratic tradition as well as its ongoing problems in protecting the human rights of women and children, and requested U.S. support for education and implementation of the*

U.N. convention on women's rights. Ivorian Association for the Defense of the Rights of Women President Constance Yai reiterated that African governments and populations are hostile to women and stressed that the absence of women in decisionmaking bodies was a major concern which contributed to the continent's problems. Nigerian Civil Liberties Organization President Ayo Obe, said that Nigerians in the past took their freedom for granted, but that due to the corruption and inefficiency of its military dictatorship, current human rights abuses added to the country's economic collapse. Ms. Obe expressed cautious optimism concerning the upcoming general election but noted that Nigeria's five political parties were all created by and beholden to the government, leading to a lack of independent ideology. She concluded by voicing the belief that the strides in human rights by neighboring African nations would lead Nigeria to follow.]

The President. Let me say just very briefly, before I ask John to speak, that in all candor the question of Nigeria has been the most difficult for us to deal with, because it is the most populous country in Africa, because it has this incredible irony of having the vast oil resources and all the poverty and dislocation at home, and because every avenue we have tried to try to deal with the government of General Abacha has been frustrating to us.

And we even had—I think it's fair to say we've had some fairly heated debates among ourselves about, well, should we just continue having nothing to do with this man? Should we try to at least deal with him in the way we're working with President Kabila? What should we do? Because it is an incredible tragedy; you have this huge, diverse, rich country, in effect, being driven into the ground by political oppression and mismanagement.

And we have said that if there were a release of the political prisoners, if there were a genuine political process that was real, not just a military government in a suit and tie, that we would try to work with it. But by your comments, you know how difficult it is to exercise any constructive influence. And yet it's a great tragedy.

I mean, when I was in Ghana, and we were discussing energy problems—just to take the energy issue—I learned that the oil production in Nigeria is continuing to burn off the natural gas instead of to save it and to sell it to Nigerians or to others, when everyone who knows anything about energy knows that the natural gas is not only just as valuable as oil but less damaging to the environment and could help to provide huge amounts of money to Nigeria to alleviate the suffering of the people and lift the condition of the people. I just give that as one example.

We will continue to do what we can. We will continue to look for other avenues, and we will continue to encourage the other African governments to do the same. And the point you made about expecting it from South Africa but needing it from the others I think is a very important one.

John.

[*John Makela, executive director of a media training institution in Mozambique, discussed the importance of strengthening the emerging media industry in African nations as a crucial arm of the democratization process. He stated that his native Zambia had a decent media presence but many other nations did not, either because of repressive governments, poor business and management skills, or both. Mr. Makela stressed the need for more widespread public discussion of issues and increased radio and Internet access, and concluded that the United States could help Africa by supporting media training institutions.*]

The President. Thank you very much. Let me just, if I could, pick up on a couple of suggestions you made. First of all, the comment you made about radio struck me as particularly important. As we traveled around the country and got into some of the rural areas, I thought about that myself. But for all of you who are interested in this, I think that it is important that people like you get out ahead of this and come up with ideas about how you could use it in a beneficial way to advance democracy and human rights. Because one of the things I worry about is that in this ongoing struggle, that some of the people that are most hostile to what you believe in could one day hit upon the instrument of the radio to drive wedges between people.

That's been one of our biggest problems in Bosnia, where we're seeking to make peace, is that instruments of the media, the radio and the television, came totally into the hands of basically the people who had a stake in keeping

the various ethnic groups at war with one another. And so they relentlessly use the radio to abuse the privilege of the airwaves, which in every country should belong to the public at large. It should be used for larger public purposes.

So I think that this is a cause, John, which you might make a common cause with other human rights groups around the continent, because I think it's very important. In the places which have no communications, including some of the villages that I have visited, it will come, and it's very important when it comes, how it comes. I cannot overestimate that to you, the importance of making sure that when this happens to the general population, that it is an instrument of education and enlightenment and bringing people together and empowering them, not just one more blunt weapon to beat them down and keep them apart.

Now, let me just say one other thing. When I listen to you all talk and putting this into the context of the larger trip, it is obvious that many, many great things are happening in Africa; that, if you look at them, you think there's an African renaissance. If you look at some of the problems you mentioned and you realize some things we haven't talked about in great detail, the education, environmental, and economic problems, there's still a lot of crisis.

I had a meeting with young leaders in South Africa to discuss this, and I said that just observing all these places—and I went to two villages, I went to three different townships and neighborhoods in South Africa when I was there, apart from the cities and the official work. And it seems to me that there is a crying need for—you have a lot of leaders and potential leaders, not only people like you who have good educations and backgrounds but the people who stood up and were applauded here—they're leaders, too. And we would like to focus more on building the structures necessary for leadership to work.

There are the national structures you talked about, the press, the education system, all of that. But there's also the need to figure out how you can best channel the resources that might come from outside at the grassroots level. We went to Dal Diam, the village here, yesterday, and we saw people essentially reclaiming the desert because someone gave them enough money to build a well. So one little village, they reclaimed 5 hectares of the desert. That's the way you reverse the growth of the desert, people do it, because they have to find a way to sustain their life as they do that.

So before we have to break up here, I would just like to say to all of you, I do not want this trip of ours to be an isolated event. I want it to be the beginning of a much more comprehensive and constructive role for the United States. So as you think about the structural issues—not just what can the President of the United States say to the leader of some other country—I want you to feel free, on your own behalf and for others with whom you come in contact, to contact us with very specific suggestions about what we can do to help people in your countries change their own lives, what kind of structural changes, supports, can be built in to build organized efforts such as the one we have celebrated today with the women and men who are here from the village that Hillary visited. I think it's very important.

We're about out of time, but I wonder if any of you have any other—any of you would like a second round of comments based on what you've heard before we adjourn. Is there anything else you would like to say to me or to each other?

Yes.

[*Ms. Sidibe asked why the United States had not ratified the convention on children's rights and a 1977 treaty on antipersonnel landmines.*]

The President. Well, let me, first of all, answer an earlier question you made. You made a lot of points about education in your earlier remarks, and we have announced a new initiative there. And I hope that—let me follow up on that just to say I hope you will think of other specific things we can do in that regard.

On the children's convention, the Senate of the United States has not ratified that because of a concern about one particular provision in it and how it relates to the sovereignty of our States in the United States. But we fully support its objectives and always have.

On the landmine issue, I don't know about the '77 convention. I can tell you that we, the United States, spend more than half of the money the whole world spends to take landmines out of the ground. We have already destroyed 1½ million of our own landmines, and we are in the process of destroying our whole supply—with the single exception of those that are in a very carefully marked plot of land in

Korea, at the border of North and South Korea. We leave them there—first of all, they're not near any residential area; they're not near any children; and the area where they are is heavily marked with warning; and no civilian has ever been hurt there—because the North Korean Army has vastly larger forces on the border of South Korea than the South Koreans and the Americans have facing them. And it's only about 18 miles from the border of North Korea to Seoul, the largest city in South Korea. And the landmines are thought to be the only presently available deterrent should an invasion occur, and no invasion has occurred.

We are there pursuant to the United Nations resolution of the conflict between North and South Korea. I think there is some encouragement that that may be resolved, that the final peace may be made. And when that happens, then the last remaining landmine issue will be resolved.

In the meanwhile, we will continue to do everything we can to end the problem of landmines for people everywhere. We will continue to spend the money that we're spending, to use the people that we're using—we, actually not very long ago, lost a crew of our Air Force—you may remember—in a tragic accident off the coast of Africa when they just deposited some American forces to take landmines up in southwest Africa. It was an airline accident, but they were there to deal with the landmine issue.

It is a very, very important thing to me, personally, and to our country. And we are trying to increase the number of people trained to take the mines up, and also increase the amount of equipment available. And interestingly enough, for the first time ever, our Defense Department has just recently purchased a machine made in South Africa that aids in the extraction of landmines from the ground. So we are working very, very hard on that.

[*A participant commended the President for listening to Africans instead of telling them what to do, and encouraged him to support reconciliation through local and regional African mechanisms.*]

The President. Well, one of the things that we have learned the hard way, just from trying to solve social problems in our own country, is that there is a sense in which the people are always ahead of the leaders. And therefore, partnership is all that works. And certainly it's true for us coming here from a totally different experience.

I believe the United States, as I said when I got here, tended to view Africa too much through the very limited lens of the cold war for too long. And I believe that the world over has seen too much of Africa only in terms of the problems, when something bad happens. So I think—what I'm trying to do is to get the scales right, to see the problems and the promise and to develop a partnership that makes sense, that will outlive my Presidency, that will fundamentally change forever the way the United States and Africa relate to one another.

It's heartbreaking to me that there are some situations for which I don't have a ready answer, the most painful and the biggest one being the one that we discussed with Nigeria. But I'm positive that if we have a consistent, ongoing effort and if we continue to listen and work together, that increasingly the promise will prevail over the problems.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:00 a.m. at the Hotel Le Meridien President. In his remarks, he referred to President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; and Gen. Sani Abacha, Chairman, Nigerian Federal Executive Council.

Remarks at Goree Island, Senegal
April 2, 1998

Thank you, Mr. President, for that magnificent address. Thank you so much.

Now, all my friends will have to tell me if the translation is working. Yes, it's working? [*Applause*] Hurray!